Vietnamese learners mastering english articles

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Chapter 6
APPROACHES TO TEACHING THE ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM

Chapter 2 has shown that the acquisition of English articles is indeed a problem for Vietnamese students and that they do not acquire the system automatically as they become more proficient. Chapter 3 and 4 have shown that the English article system is so complex that philosophers and linguists have difficulty in agreeing on the underlying notions designated by the different forms. Chapter 5 has shown that the English article system is conceptually so different from the Vietnamese system that it must be almost impossible for students whose L1, like Vietnamese, does not have a corresponding system, to recognize the underlying rules and conventions. However, with the great emphasis on communicative language teaching in recent decades, many researchers such as Pica mentioned in Chapter 5 do not believe that teaching these rules and conventions explicitly leads to improved acquisition. On the other hand, several studies have shown the usefulness of attention to form or forms (cf. Norris and Ortega 2000). No matter which view one holds, it is a fact that grammar books are published and used widely. Teachers, especially non-native language teachers of English as a foreign language, look for help in pedagogical grammar books such as Quirk et al. (1985) and reference books such as Swan (1994), and use textbooks such as Murphy (1985) to help improve their students' performance. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the Vietnamese students we tested, who have no doubt been exposed to such books, have not yet mastered the English article system to any great degree, and there seems to be very little systematicity to their interlanguage. In other words,

the methods used so far have not proven to be very effective. Without taking a position on the usefulness of focus on form or forms, we believe that one problem in the current books is that they do not address the article system in a manner that makes clear the meaning of the forms to the L2 learners whose language does not have a similar system.

In this chapter, we will first survey pedagogical studies, books teachers may use, on teaching articles and some current grammar-cum-practice books, books students use, and we will argue that they are not in line with the theoretical findings presented in Chapter 3. At the end of this chapter, we will present a description we feel would be more effective.

PEDAGOGICAL SUGGESTIONS ON TEACHING ENGLISH ARTICLES

As Beaumont remarks (1994), it is not an easy task to set up a working basis for teaching articles, but there has been agreement that formal instruction is needed to achieve a positive effect in helping non-native students acquire the English article system (Lindstromberg, 1986; Berry, 1991; Master, 1997). This is also reflected through the different attempts on proposing different approaches of teaching the English articles on the grounds of students' errors and of objections to either a linguistic theory or problems from approaches found in grammar books. In the following paragraphs we will present a brief overview of these studies.

During the time the generative-transformational paradigm was dominant in linguistic theory, Grannis (1972) was the first to object to using this theory in explaining article use and propose a non-formal approach. One of his main objections was related to the fact that the theory could not account for differences in meaning between the following pairs of sentences with a restrictive relative clause.

1. a. I saw the man *whom Albert told me about*.
   b. I saw a man *whom Albert told me about*.
2. a. I saw every man *whom Albert told me about*.
   b. I saw that man *whom Albert told me about*.

He, therefore, advised teachers to ignore the dominant theoretical framework and "fall back into a basically unstructured, traditional approach to the description of English" (p.288).

Whitman (1974), also reacting to the inadequacy of the linguistic theory at the time to explain meaning, proposes a pedagogical sequence on the assumption that English article structure "is a sequence of quantification and determination rather than a choice between specified and unspecified" (p.253). He suggests six consecutive steps for teaching the English articles based on ease of explanation and frequency of occurrence:

1. Quantity (singular/plural distinction)
   This is a book vs. Those are three books.
2. Generic plural:
   All apples are red > Apples are red.
3. Non-count nouns (count nouns vs. non-count nouns)
   A lot of *books* vs. A lot of *water*
   Many *books* vs. Much *water*
4. Determiners: (Which-NP question; second mention)
   Which books are green? *The books* on the table.
   I saw *a book*. *The book* was called "Moby Dick."
5. Quantity and determiner:
   One of the books on that table is blue.
6. Generic articles
   A mouse is smaller than a rat.
   The mouse is smaller than the rat.
   Mice are smaller than rats.

Whitman introduces quantity first because "the concept of 'counting' is easier to talk about than the concept of 'known groups'" (p. 258). Then, since the generic plural is closely related to the concept of quantity, Whitman introduces the generic plural in step two and retains generic

articles *a/an* and *the* until the last step because generics *a* and *the* are not commonly found.

McEldowney (1977), without referring to a particular grammatical theory, advocates the idea of simplifying the grammar of the English articles. She based her study on the 'common errors' tradition of French (1949) and her experience of training teachers of English as a foreign language. In simplifying the grammar of the English article system, she raises the importance of establishing one form for one function (i.e. code marker). To her, three concepts that comport with the three markers are: (a) choice marked by *a* in the sense of any; (b) specification coded through special *the*; (c) and generalization through general *–s* and *a* and *the*. On the basis of these three forms, she suggests a four-stage teaching approach, which can be summarized into three main stages.

> Stage 1: count nouns used in the sense of "any one" and "the special one."
> Stage 2: uncountable nouns distinguished by "the substance in general" and "the special substance" (e.g. mud vs. the black mud).
> Stage 3: generalizations conveyed through the three markers (i.e. a + N; the + N; the + N + s).

Lindstromberg (1986) also suggests that teaching the rules of article usage can make a difference to learners in helping them understand and use the system. However, his approach is not to simplify the system as suggested by McEldowney but to make the complex system manageable on the basis of simplifying the terminology. Master (1991) (discussed below) has incorporated some of these suggestions.

Berry (1991), after studying current approaches in some grammar-cum-practice books, finds that they "are not yet well in the matter of teaching articles." Three main problems that he identifies are (1) incorrect or

misleading formulation, (2) unwarranted emphasis on certain usage types, and (3) lack of variety in formats. A typical misleading formulation is second mention usage. Berry states that there are cases in which *the* is not used after *a* is used for the first time (see Chapter 3). Cases of unwarranted emphasis are generic usage, *the* used with proper nouns, and also second-mention usage, which are uses that are not commonly found. The lack of variety in formats has to do with the over-use of gap filling in exercises designed to practice usage. According to Berry, a harmful effect of this type of exercise is that it can reinforce learners' beliefs about the redundancy of the articles. For learners can wonder why they should fill in the articles based on "the information in the rest of the text" when the information is there already.

Based on these three objections, Berry proposes seven principles in designing materials for teaching the articles, which can be summed up into three main points: (1) use a principled descriptive account; (2) make exercises / activities varied in terms of production, comprehension and perception, and (3) apply some principles of presentation methodology (e.g. simplicity, appropriateness). Berry uses Quirk *et al.* (1985), who incorporates insights from Hawkins (1978), as a source of such a principled descriptive account.

In line with Lindstromberg's recommendation to simplify rules is Master's account. Master (1990) introduces a binary system in which article use is reduced to a meaning contrast between "identification" (marked by *the*) and "classification" (marked by *a* or ø). The binary system, in fact, is an effort to manipulate various descriptions by simplifying them with attention to the principle of *one form* for *one function* (McEldowney, 1977; Bolinger, 1977). Although he does not refer to the cognitive grammar framework, his method is rather 'cognitive' in that he ignores "specificity" in definite and

indefinite nouns (Table 1). In Cognitive Grammar, Langacker (1991, vol. 2: 104) argues that the notion of specificity may be useful in establishing a discourse referent, but should be put aside "as a red herring" in explaining English articles. Master's schema (1990) is based on his original 6-point schema (1988b) and is improved in that it focuses on helping students identify (1) countability, (2) definiteness, (3) modification, (4) specificity vs. genericity, (5) common noun vs. proper noun, and (6) idiomatic usage. Master (1987, quoted in Master, 1997) tested his original approach and found a significant improvement in test performance, but he wonders if the improvement might have arisen from "the focusing of students' attention on the need for articles in English rather than from any explicit method for choosing the article correctly" (1990: 465), which in our opinion might well have been a direct effect after explicit teaching. In his study, Master did not contrast his approach with another one, nor did he test for long-term effects.

Table 1. *Master's Summary of Aspects of Classification and Identification* (1990)

Classification (*a*; ø)	**Identification** (*the*)
Count/noncount	
First mention	Subsequent mention
	Ranking adjectives
	Shared knowledge
Defining postmodification	Limiting postmodification
Partitive of-phrase	Descriptive of-phrase
Intentional vagueness	
General characteristics	
Existential *there* and *it*	
	Generic *the*
Classified proper nouns	Proper nouns (ø and *the*)
Idiomatic phrases	Idiomatic phrases

From the studies mentioned so far, some observations can be made. Overall, all suggestions include producing a simplified framework for teaching the articles. Emphasis is found either on the sequence between form and function (Whitman, 1974) or in the correspondence between those two entities (McEldowney, 1977; Master, 1990). That is, one form should correspond with one function. The second aspect is the categorization of the notions concerning the semantic function of the articles. The division is centered around the specific-generic distinction (McEldowney, 1977; Berry, 1991) and definiteness (i.e. classification vs. identification) (Master, 1990). Another general agreement among the studies is that generic usage should not be overly emphasized (Berry, 1991) or should be presented only after all other aspects of article usage are mastered (Whitman, 1974; McEldowney, 1977; Master, 1990).

The studies mentioned so far also have some shortcomings. The main shortcoming, in our opinion, is that readers are not explicitly made aware of the general meanings of the articles (null, definite, indefinite and zero) nor the underlying concepts of notions ascribed to them such as "definiteness", "genericity", "count", "non-count", and so on, so that each case is treated as a separate case rather than as part of a whole system. Another shortcoming is the fact that the treatment of proper names is left out completely or treated only as item-learnt chunks (Berry, 1991; Beaumont, 1994), without giving underlying principles to help students memorize those chunks. Finally, even though there have been suggestions for sequencing article lessons (Whitman, 1974; McEldowney, 1977; Master, 1990) and using appropriate 'ingredients' for different levels (Master, 1997), none of the studies include suggestions to adapt a pedagogical approach to the needs of a particular student population (e.g. like Vietnamese), ignoring the idea

that a good pedagogic rule should be able to answer a question that "is generated by [a learner's] interlanguage" (Swan, 1994: 51).

Finally, these proposals lack empirical evidence. Recommendations are made, but no statistical results of the applications are reported. Master did mention his experiment (1987) on spoken article usage by 20 non-native speakers, but only short-term effects of the teaching method were measured.

However, on the whole, Master's account is in our eyes pedagogically the most sound in that it gives the students one general "rule" that is easy to remember and apply: "If the noun is definite, use *the*; if not, use *a* or zero". We will use this system as a starting point, but we will pay more explicit attention to why a noun may be used in a definite sense and how, through "construal" the same noun, even in a similar context, may be used in a definite or non-definite sense (e.g "Please, I would like to order a tuna fish sandwich" versus "I would like to order the tuna fish sandwich"). Another difference between Master's system and ours will be the fact that in our system emphasis is given to why a noun may be considered count or non-count, again related to construal as in "I need *sleep*" versus "I need *a sleep*".

In the next section, we will see to what extent the suggestions mentioned above in treating the article system have found their way in the textbooks students actually use.

STUDENT TEXTBOOKS AND THE ENGLISH ARTICLES

In this section we turn our attention to currently commonly used grammar textbooks to see how article usage is actually described. Four grammar books that are surveyed are: (1) *Advanced Grammar in Use* (Hewings, 1999), (2) *Oxford Practice Grammar* (Eastwood, 1999), (3) *English*

Grammar in Use (Murphy, 1985), (4) *Mosaic one: A Content-based Grammar* (Werner, 1996). These are also called grammar-cum-practice books because they give considerable amounts of grammatical information along with exercises (Chalker, 1994). All four stress that they are self-study reference and practice books and that they are for intermediate level students and upwards. These books are available in Vietnam and widely used by teachers at universities there.

The following questions will guide this survey:

1. What issues concerning article use are dealt with?
2. What are the general presentation patterns of these issues?
3. How are the contents sequenced?
4. How are the rules designed (i.e. described)?

Usage Content and Categorization

In the four books, the following issues are treated: countability of nouns, specific uses and generic uses of the articles with common nouns, and use of the articles with proper names and in fixed phrases.

Concerning countability of nouns, two issues are often dealt with: countability vs. non-countability and number. Number is treated based on countable nouns which can take two forms: singular or plural. Under the non-count noun category are mass nouns.

With respect to the articles, besides the definite article *the* and the indefinite articles *a/an* and zero, some textbooks mention the use of *some*. In describing the uses of the definite article, textbook writers focus on four main issues: anaphoric reference use (i.e. prior awareness in relation to speech-act participants), immediate and larger situation reference (i.e. unique things), cataphoric reference use (i.e. nominal content), and logical

use (e.g. with superlatives). It is worth noting that some authors have categorized anaphoric use, immediate situation, and cataphoric use under one category as 'known things'. Larger situation is treated under the category of unique things. Under the category 'known things', except Hewings, the other authors did not mention indirect anaphoric use. Under the category of unique things, a kind of 'forced' categorization is found in some authors. For example, the use of *the* with a superlative (e.g. It's *the biggest hotel* in town) is treated as an exception under the category of non-specific uses of *a/an* (e.g. It's a big hotel).

With reference to the indefinite articles, besides the typical use as 'not saying which one,' (Eastwood, 1999), non-specific usage is found through such descriptions as to classify things, to describe people, or to define things (Murphy, 1985; Eastwood, 1999; Hewings, 1999).

Regarding proper names, textbook writers focus on the following categories: people, places, meals, and temporal terms (including holidays).

Patterns of Article Usage Presentation

Two general patterns are found from the presentation of the usage contents mentioned above: a discrete presentation or a contrastive one. A discrete presentation is noticeable through the separate treatment of two main kinds of articles (i.e. *the* and the indefinite articles) in separate parts or lessons (Werner, 1996).

By contrast, a contrastive presentation is the treatment of the articles, namely *the* and *a/an* at the same time in each chapter or lesson based on a certain usage content (Murphy, 1985; Eastwood, 1999; Hewings, 1999). The contents that the authors often make use for a contrastive presentation are

centered on the three main specific uses of *the*: known things (i.e. second mention and immediate situation), unique things, and things in general (i.e. generic use).

Sequencing

From those two general presentations, some sequencing patterns are also found based on the main content areas. Overall, the general sequence is that countability is presented before the uses of the articles with common nouns. Proper names and fixed expressions come last.

Concerning article usage, some sequencing patterns are discerned based on a particular kind of presentation. In a discrete presentation, uses of the indefinite articles are presented before those of the definite article (Werner, 1996). In a contrastive presentation, specific uses are presented before generic uses (Murphy, 1985; Eastwood, 1999; Hewings, 1999).

Further observations can be made with generic uses based on presentation patterns. In a discrete presentation, use of indefinite generics (i.e. *a/an, some* and *zero*) are addressed before generic *the.* In a contrastive presentation, generic *the* is compared first with generic *zero*, and then with generic a/an. It is also worth noting that, in both ways of presentation, each lesson or section will end with sets of exercises that are related to the grammatical points introduced.

Rule descriptions and presentation

Recent developments in linguistic theory and suggestions from pedagogical theorists seem to have left some 'traces' in these books. For example, Eastwood uses such terms as *old* vs. *new* information when explaining the anaphoric use of *the* with a noun when later references are made to it . Or

the role of the speech act participants is stressed in *Advanced Grammar in Use* (Hewings, 1999). For instance, after introducing an example about an apple pie, Hewings explains that "we say 'an apple pie' when we first mention it, and 'the apple pie' after that, when the listener or reader knows which apple pie we mean." (unit 58). The importance of context in determining the use of *the* is also addressed. This is found in the introduction to the use of the definite article in Werner's (1996). Improvements on the formats of exercises, as suggested by Berry (1991), are also found in some authors, especially those textbooks that have been published recently. Besides the traditional gap filling format, which is one form of production exercises, forms of recognition exercises are also found. These kinds of exercises range from error recognition to identifying meaning difference. A variety of formats of production exercises are also perceived. Some of them are: error correction, sentence completion, paraphrasing, and reproduction based on a 'bare' text (i.e. without articles).

Besides those positive traits, some inadequacies can be detected from these books. The first problem is concerned with the usage rules. In some cases, there are many detailed rules. These cases are found in sections dealing with non-specific uses of a/an. The rules are stated as functional uses (e.g. to describe things; to describe people's jobs) based on the complement construction (i.e. be + complement). Proper names are also the case. No general principles were provided as guidelines for the retention of many rules and exceptions.

The second problem has to do with vague descriptions. Such terms as 'particular' or 'identified' are an example. The description such as "we say *the* when we mean something in particular" (Murphy, 1985) may raise skepticism. For, as discussed in chapter 3, *a car* in "I bought *a car* this morning" also refers to a particular car and can be distinguished from other

cars I have in my mind (Lyons, 1999). A similar problem can also be perceived through the term 'identified' as used in the following description: "*The* is used before a singular or plural count noun when that noun is specifically identified" (Werner, 1996: 205). Suppose that in the 2004 presidential election of the United States, an American may say: "I wonder who *the president* is this term." One question can be asked is: "can he - as the speaker - identify the referent of the definite noun phrase? The answer is probably not. He or she cannot identify the president as Kerry or Bush. But *the president* is possible because there is an association with the election or that the president is associated with the fact each country should have only one president. Eastwood (1999) seems to avoid this problem by describing that "we use *the* when it is clear which one we mean." The situation is, however, not much better than the former. Students may wonder how they are able to know "when it is clear which one we mean."

Potential misunderstandings from the rule descriptions are another problem. First, although some authors, in describing the cataphoric use of *the*, are careful in wording the rule by adding the word 'often', the attempt cannot eliminate the possibility of causing a misunderstanding in students that: 'use *the* whenever a noun is modified by a modifying phrase or clause.' Second, the contrastive introduction of *the* with predicate nouns modified by superlatives or ordinals (e.g. *He is* ***the tallest person***) after demonstrating the use of *a/an* with predicate nouns functioning as describing things (e.g. *This is* ***a book***) or jobs (e.g. He's *a teacher*) may give rise to the fact that the definite article is used limitedly to the superlatives or ordinals in those structures in which the nouns act as complement of the verb *be*. Another problem is found with the explanation of the definite article in generic usage. We feel doubtful about the 'appropriateness' of a description such as "we don't use *the* before a plural noun when we mean something in general"

(Murphy, 1985). For how we can explain the phrase *The Finns* as in "***The Finns** are fond of sport*" (Quirk, 1985: 284).

Simplicity, a criterion in designing pedagogic rules (Swan (1994) can be a factor that accounts for the problems discussed. However, the relationship between truth and simplicity is not in good terms sometimes given "some trade-off with truth and/or clarity" (Swan, 1994: 48). In relation to the vague description "use *the* when it is clear which one we mean" mentioned above, a simplified-but-unmanageable rule is not efficient. Some detailed descriptions concerning the contexts in which *the* is used should have been provided. Also other aspects of *the*-usage should have been mentioned rather than having been left out as a result of oversimplification. Indirect anaphora (i.e. latent awareness), also remarked by Berry (1991) in his survey, and the lack of giving demarcation rules concerning cataphoric use (i.e. a noun followed by a modifying phrase or clause) are examples (Werner, 1996; Hewings, 1999, Eastwood 1999). Explanations should be given, for example, about the possibility that a *zero* determiner is likely to be used with a noun followed by a modifying phrase or clause. Though Murphy (1985) admits that in some cases the difference between something in general and something in particular is not easy to distinguish, he provides no more general 'guidelines' or elaboration on the issue.

To sum up, the survey of the four commonly used grammar books has shown that there are several problems in treating the article system. The descriptions of the rules are often either vague, inadequate, or actually contradictory and confusing. Moreover, even though some of the books have a 'notional-functional' approach, none of the books give an overall principled introduction to the article system, leaving it up to the student to make sense of a maze of separate, seemingly arbitrary uses of the article

system. Clearly, all of the methods are based on a traditional description of the article system. To deal with the article in a more principled way, we developed an approach based on Master's schema, augmented with insights from cognitive grammar.

ENGLISH ARTICLE USAGE: A COGNITIVE GRAMMAR-BASED APPROACH

Our approach is concerned with textbook instruction for high-intermediate or advanced Vietnamese students who aim to obtain a high level of fluency and accuracy in their L2. The main aim was to present the "rules" of using English articles in such a way that students whose L1 has a system completely different from English, could "reason out" a native speaker's intuitive "rule" step by step by means of a flow chart that is kept as general and simple as possible. We felt the reasoning should go from most general principles and prototypical cases to peripheral or less frequent cases. Because article use may seem completely arbitrary in some cases, such as "He needs education" versus "He needs an education" or "I've been writing letters" vs. "I've been writing some letters" we felt students needed to be made aware of the principles that cause the differences in meaning. We also felt that "simple" rules such as first and second mention should be avoided or reformulated as they are simply inaccurate and may cause more harm than good (Berry, 1991; Beaumont & Gallaway, 1994). However, because our students have been exposed to such rules extensively already, they should be warned explicitly against the use of such rules in our lessons. In the same line, we felt that such rules as "use *the* when a noun is modified by a phrase or a clause" should be reinterpreted on the basis of the fact zero or a can still be used. On account of this, students should also be warned to be vigilant with this kind of rules.

We assumed Vietnamese students have a different intuition about what is considered "definite" or "non-definite" in English because the Vietnamese language has a different way (i.e. a covert one) for marking definiteness. We also assumed Vietnamese learners would have great difficulty in developing an intuition about whether an English noun is count or non-count because most nouns are mass nouns in Vietnamese. Finally, we assumed that Vietnamese learners have more problems with using the articles in unique type and maximal set environments as reported in Chapter 4. Obviously, these two environments have to do with genericity. It is the context that plays an important role in determining whether or not an instance is construed either as a unique type or with maximal generality; as such an appropriate article form can be decided. Therefore, we devoted a separate section as a 'consolidation part' to help students get an overview of the issue after the main principles (i.e. concerning definiteness) have been presented. .

In the remainder of this section we will discuss the general principles on which our approach is based and point out the similarities and differences between other approaches were applicable. Then we will discuss several elements separately.

General Principles

First the students are told that English has two general classes of nouns: common nouns and proper nouns and that to avoid confusion, proper nouns will be dealt with at the end. Students are told that the first step is to decide whether a common noun is used in a definite sense or not. If so, the noun requires *the*. If not, the noun requires *a* if it is a singular count noun and zero if it is not a singular count noun.

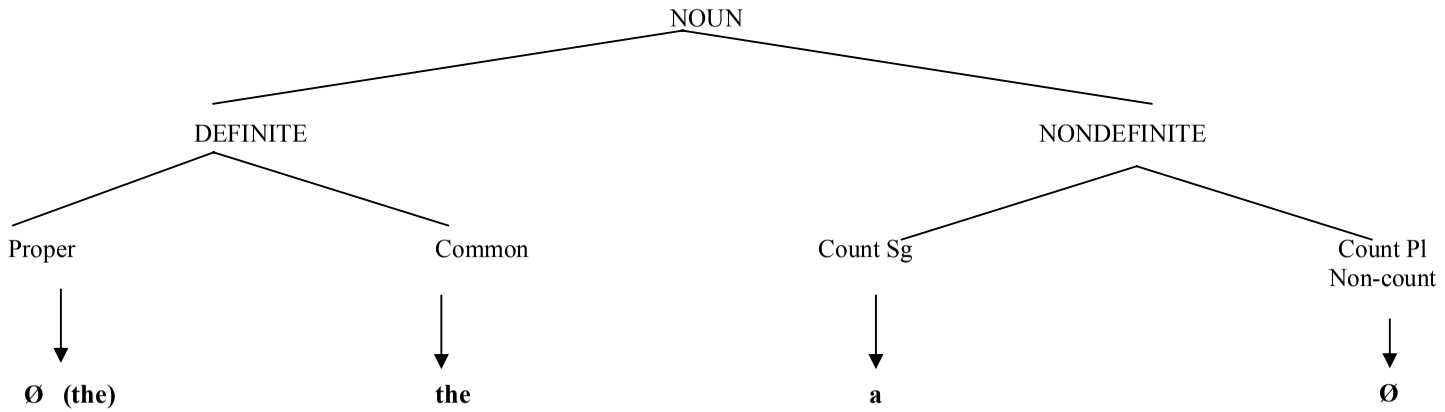


Figure 1. *Flow chart showing article use*

This flow chart (fig.1) reminds one of the phrase found in most traditional grammar textbooks "use *the* when a noun is definite" or "use *a/an* when a noun is indefinite," but also accounts for the fact that a proper noun may have a *zero*-determiner. Moreover, this approach emphasizes the importance of meaning in that students are to discover the sense in which a noun is used, i.e. in a definite or non-definite sense, before finding out which article to use. In fact, we are implicitly referring to the Langacker's concept of "grounding" by asking students to discover whether a noun is used in a definite sense or not and to Langacker's concept of "quantity" when we ask whether a noun is used as a count noun or not and if so whether it is singular or not.

Another difference between this approach and traditional ones is the fact that definiteness is treated before countability. This has been done for several interrelated reasons. First of all, if a common noun is used in a definite sense, it will always take *the*, so a student can be spared the extra trouble to find out whether the noun is count or not, especially because the notion of countability is tied up with the notions of "boundedness" and "construal" and reasoning out whether a noun is countable or not takes several more steps than reasoning out whether it is definite or non-definite. Also, the notion of definiteness is so unfamiliar to our student population that we felt it needed a great deal of attention.

This approach also implies a discrete presentation of the different articles: first *the* for definiteness and then *a* or *zero* for non-definiteness. Contrastive presentations are given only after students have been given the general underlying principles in meaning and to make clear what the subtle differences in meaning might be when using different articles in similar situations. For example, at the end of Lesson 3 we illustrate the subtle differences in meaning between generic statements such as "*A tiger* is a

fierce animal, *Tigers* are fierce animals, and *The tiger* is a fierce animal" based on the general principles already discussed.

This approach may seem oversimplified in that it ignores a distinction between specific and generic, but we feel this distinction is not needed. When a noun phrase is definite, it is implied that it is also specific as a result of the mental contact coordinated by the speaker and the hearer with a unique instance of a type (Langacker, 1991: vol.2) and can thus be ignored. Besides, generic *the* is not that different from specific *the* and can be seen through the difference between two notions: the physical domain of instantiation and the abstract domain of instantiation. Using Master's terms (1990: 468), the physical domain of instantiation can be construed as "a real or actual noun," while the abstract domain of instantiation, called *type space* in cognitive grammar, has to do with the idea or concept that a noun suggests or profiles.

In the physical domain of instantiation, each type (i.e. kind) such as a *computer* has many instances, and if the speaker and the hearer share mental contact on one particular instance of a computer, it is uniquely identified and therefore definite and implicitly specific. In the abstract domain of instantiation, there are many types, such as tables, chairs, computers, wheels, tigers, dogs, and so on. In other words, a class of entities as a whole is considered a "type" and our world can be considered a "type space" and the world has many instances of types. If the speaker and hearer coordinate mental contact on one particular type as a whole, it can also be construed as uniquely identified and therefore definite, but in this case implicitly generic. Therefore, we feel it is warranted to use the notion of definiteness for both specific *the* and generic *the*, the more because it keeps the schema as simple as possible.

Also in the case of indefinite noun phrases, the distinction between specific and generic reference can be partly ignored because as far as Langacker is concerned, they both are non-definite. This is in line with Master who argues that "whether or not we mean a specific, actual tick [as in *A tick entered my ear*] or a generic one [as in *A tick carries disease*], we still classify that tick when we use the article *a*" (p. 467). The distinction between specific and generic may be important, however, when the noun is referred to again by a pronominal, as for example in "I needed *a digital camera*, but I couldn't find *it*" versus "I couldn't find *one*". We agree with Master that this distinction can be dealt with later in the instruction of an advanced class of English as a second or foreign language.

One difference between the cognitive schema and Master's lies in terminology. Master justifies the terms *identified* and *classified* by saying that they "embrace a larger concept than definiteness" (p. 466). We do not agree because in almost all discussions the general notion *definiteness* subsumes such notions as familiarity, identifiability, uniqueness, and inclusiveness. Therefore our schema will use the traditional terms: definiteness and non-definiteness.

Also, there is one major conceptual difference between the cognitive schema and Master's binary schema. In his classification, Master mentions two features: [±identified] and [±count], which are somewhat similar to the cognitive notions of "grounding" and "quantification". In CG a nominal (i.e. article-marked noun) should be grounded and quantified (see Fig.2).

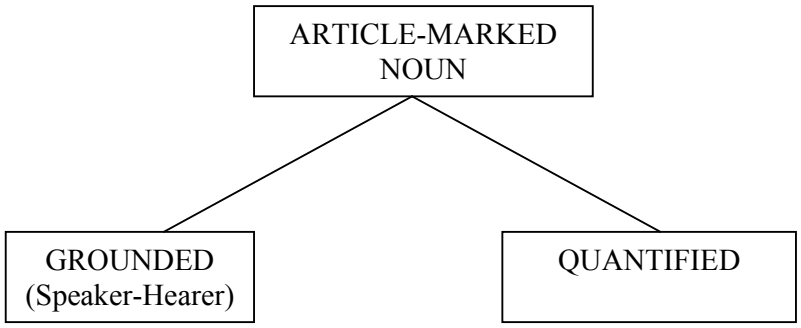


Fig.2. *Cognitive schema for grounding and quantification*

The main difference is that the notion of *grounding* stresses the role of speech-act participants in relation to the current discourse space. In other words, in cognitive grammar it is up to the speech-act participants to construe an entity as definite or not, as can be exemplified with the previously mentioned example of "I will have a tuna fish sandwich" versus "I will have the tuna fish sandwich". Even though the objective situation may be entirely the same, the speech act participant may construe an entitity as uniquely identifiable or not. The noun phrase also contains information about quantity, both *a* + singular noun and *the* + singular noun in these examples signify that there is one instance of the type sandwich.

Another important difference between our schema and Master's is the fact that ours is a scalar one, ranging from definiteness to non-definiteness in line with Jespersen's scale of familiarity (i.e. complete familiarity, nearly complete familiarity, and complete unfamiliarity). Under the category of definiteness, there are three groups of items: (a) proper names, (b) types as unique instances, and (c) instances uniquely identified in the current discourse space. Under the category of non-definiteness, there

are also three groups of items: (a) particular or actual instances, (b) arbitrary instances, and (c) maximal generality.

Corresponding to the aspects of meaning in Figure 3 are the forms ranging from *zero* to *zero* (See Fig.4). Although we favor the idea of one form for one meaning (Bolinger, 1977), it is not entirely possible in his schema. Both a proper name, which is on the utmost left of the scale, and a maximally general noun, which is at the utmost right of the scale, take a *zero*-determiner. However, to avoid confusing students with one form for two different senses, proper names are treated separately in the lessons.

Proper names are often used with the *null* article, but they can also be found with the definite article, causing confusion. Traditional approaches often favor offering them as item-learnt chunks to be memorized. However, this may be almost impossible to do without some understanding of underlying principles. Our approach includes explaining the principle of *familiarity* (Jespersen, 1933), which is similar to Quirk's (1985) gradient between descriptions (i.e. the + proper name + common noun) and names. Recall an example from Chapter 3. During the course of language change, a phrase such as *the Oxford Road* may experience changes as it becomes more and more familiar to language users and eventually may be referred to simply as *Oxford*:

The Oxford road >> The Oxford Road >> Oxford Road >> Oxford.

This principle of familiarity can be used to explain the fact that some Proper Names still have a definite article as in "the Huong river" and some common nouns used with zero article with a definite sense (Quirk, 1985) such as (by) *bus*, (on) *TV*, (to) *bed* and so on.

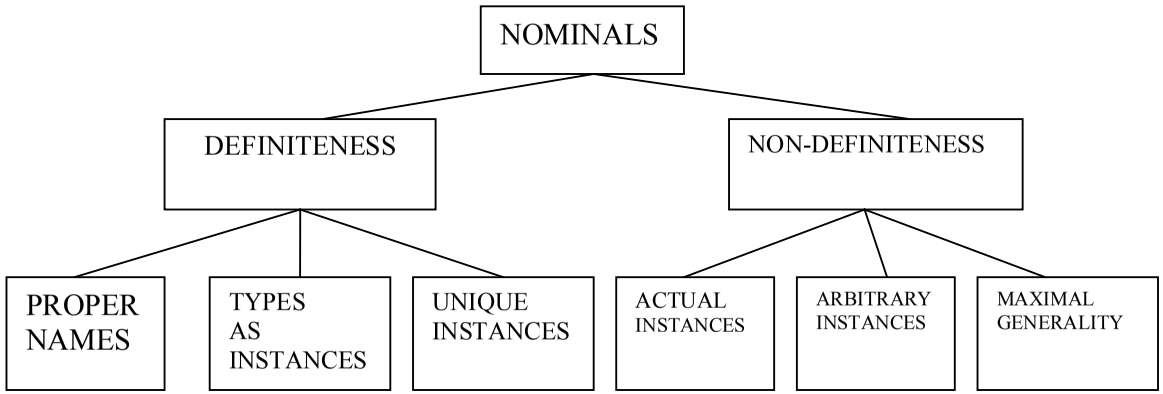


Fig. 3. *Entities that are considered definite and non-definite*

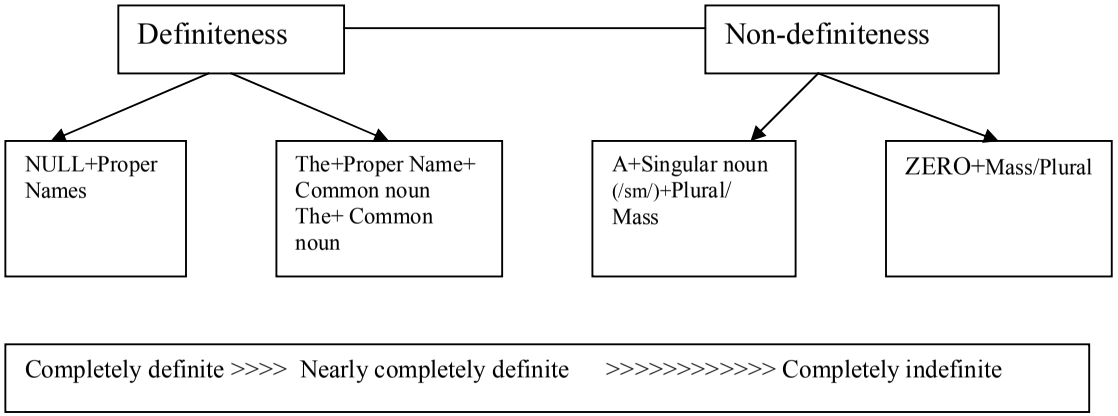


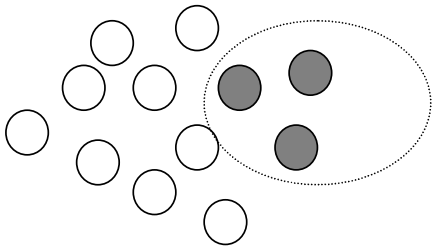
Fig. 4. *Form and meaning of articles*

On the whole we have tried to limit the number of separate explanations, starting with the two notions of "definiteness" and "non-definiteness" and their prototypical uses and then extending them to less frequent cases. In each case we try to explain how the non-prototypical cases are motivated. Now that we have given reasons for the general choices we have made in our approach, we will present a brief outline of the actual lessons (see *Appendix*) with a rationale for the choices.

Elements of The Approach

After students are presented with the flow chart (see Figure 1), they are made aware of the difference in meaning between the different forms of the article by asking them which one of the four following sentences would be the most efficient and appropriate way for a speaker to obtain three black balls.

a. Please pick up black balls.
b. Please pick up the black balls.
c. Please pick up the three black balls.
d. Please pick up three black balls.



Sentences (a) and (d) would not be appropriate. Both (b) and (c) could reflect what the speaker wants, but (b) would be more efficient. This activity is intended to raise student's awareness of the fact that the use of articles is meaningful. The notions of definiteness, non-definiteness, and through it, the sense of 'maximality' are implicitly introduced. After this general introduction there are separate lessons on definiteness, non-definiteness, count-non-count nouns and proper names.

Definiteness

The first lesson deals with the notion of definiteness. In line with insights from cognitive grammar, the role of the Speaker and Hearer in sharing their awareness of the sense of a noun is stressed. To keep the schema and definitions as simple as possible, we give one general definition, which stresses the notion of "uniquely identifiable to Speaker and hearer":

> A noun is used in a definite sense when both the Speaker and Hearer (or writer and reader) know exactly which one(s) is/are meant. In other words, when a Speaker thinks that the Hearer can identify it as unique or the only ones, he/she will mark a common noun with the definite article (or another definite determiner, which will be discussed later).

Then the different contexts in which a noun can be considered "uniquely identifiable" are given: when there is only *one* in our world (general world or immediate surroundings), when there is only *one* that can be meant in the immediate context (text or conversation), when only *one* can be logically meant, and when a class as a *whole* is referred to (this is also called a generic sense). Each of these cases is followed by elaborations and exercises.

Non-definiteness

The lesson on non-definiteness starts with a reminder of what is considered definite and the statement is made that if a nominal is not definite, it will be non-definite by default. Students are reminded of the notion of "mental contact" as it is also a useful notion in introducing non-definiteness. Because many advanced students have already been exposed to the notion of specificity before, the lesson points out with several examples that English does not mark for specificity, but only for definiteness and non-definiteness.

Two main non-definite uses are presented: an actual member of the class (e.g. I bought *a TV*), and an arbitrary member of the class (e.g. *A whale* is a mammal). To limit the number of different classes as much as possible, the notion of arbitrary case member is extended to include nominals in complement constructions (e.g. A whale is *a mammal*). To counteract the incorrect "second mention rule" that Vietnamese students no doubt have been exposed to, the lesson points out that the second mention rule applies only to actual members of a class. (e.g. I bought *a TV and a camcorder. But the TV* …)

Also, because students have "learned" the incorrect rule that nouns followed by a modifying phrase are always definite, a section points out how to determine what article is used when a noun is modified by a phrase or clause. Also, a separate section is devoted to the difference between *the*, *a/an* and *zero* when used generically and relates these to the general notions definiteness and non-definiteness that were introduced earlier.

Countability

Once students know which nouns are used in a non-definite sense, they have to be able to determine whether the noun is count or not. The underlying conceptual notions of "boundedness" and "construal" are first introduced. For example, a noun like *stone* can be construed either as bounded (i.e. He lifted *a stone*.) or unbounded (i.e. The house is built of *stone*). After giving examples and explanations with prototypical concrete mass nouns the notions are extended to abstract entities such a "transportation", "education" and so on.

Proper nouns and names

In the introduction, proper nouns and names are first mentioned, but because they seemingly behave in an opposite manner from common nouns they are dealt with separately to avoid confusion. Proper names, when used in a prototypical sense are definite, but do not take an article. When used as a common noun, then they use articles.

a. Mrs. Johnson called. (Proper name used in a prototypical sense; Mrs. Johnson is uniquely identifiable by Speaker and Hearer)
b. A Mrs. Johnson called. (Proper name used as a common noun; Mrs. Johnson is not uniquely identifiable by Speaker and Hearer)

In this chapter, we have tried to show what the problems may have been in traditional approaches in teaching the English article system to Vietnamese students and have presented a description and rationale for a new approach that takes Master's schema as a starting point and is enhanced with insights from cognitive grammar. The overall aim has been to show the English article system as a coherent system, but also to present as simply as possible. The main choices are between definite and non-definite and these notions are made clear by showing the role of both the speaker and hearer in construing the entity. We feel that our approach is pedagogically more sound than traditional ones because it alleviates the burden of having to memorize many separate, seemingly arbitrary rules. However, the "proof is in the pudding" and we will test this hypothesis in the next chapter.